Institutions, organisations and gender equality in an era of globalisation

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Development organisations can play a significant role in supporting women in the communities where they work to challenge unequal gender relations. The authors of this article argue that the majority of development organisations fail to do so because they pay insufficient attention to the importance of social institutions in perpetuating inequality. Two prominent approaches to gender mainstreaming emphasise organisational infrastructure and culture. Ideas in these approaches are necessary, but insufficient, to enable organisations to play a part in transforming the social institutions that perpetuate gender inequality. Gender at Work is a new global capacity-building and knowledge network aiming to promote institutional change through encouraging development organisations to analyse gender relations in the societies in which they work, and in the institutions they need to challenge. It reviews past efforts of development organisations to mainstream gender into their work, and develops programmes and processes to challenge institutional norms which work against women's interests.

Although much has been accomplished by now in the name of gender equality, it is still true that in no region of the world are women and men equal in legal, social or economic rights (World Bank, 2001). We believe that this is because the bulk of development and human rights work toward gender inequality ignores the role of the institutions (formal and informal) that maintain women's unequal position. There is a growing consensus among feminists across the world that to make a significant impact on gender inequity, we must change institutions. In India, for example, over one million women have been elected to local level governing bodies, as a result of a 1993 amendment to the Indian Constitution requiring that one-third of the elected seats to local governing bodies be reserved for women. This motion gives women a legitimate space to participate, and possibly a voice, but this does not guarantee their influence. That awaits the change of (largely informal) institutions that constrain women's political participation and influence in local decision-making.

To clarify, the terms 'institution' and 'organisation' are often used synonymously, but we find it useful to distinguish between the two. We understand institutions as the rules for achieving social or economic ends (Kabeer, 1996). They determine who gets what, who does what, and who decides. The rules that maintain women's position in societies may be stated or implicit. These rules would include values that maintain the gendered division of labour; prohibitions on women owning land; and restrictions on women's mobility. Perhaps the most fundamental is the devaluing of reproductive work.

Of course, changing institutions is far from easy and our global understanding of it is far from sophisticated. At the same time, there are changes in a promising

direction. Women leaders around the world, whether they work on economic policy, legislation, education, organisational change or grassroots health care are initiating ideas and practices that have the potential to change institutions, but these innovations are not getting into the mainstream.

One clear understanding that has emerged is that institutions change (in large part) as a result of the actions of organisations. Whenever an organisation intervenes in the life of a community, it has the ongoing choice whether to challenge or support existing community gender-related norms. For example, BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) is one of the world's largest indigenous rural development organisations, working with over two million poor rural and urban women in Bangladesh. When members of BRAC village organisations began to raise the issue of arbitrary divorces or unjust actions regarding inheritances, BRAC chose to start a para-legal programme which advised village women on their rights, thereby supporting them in challenging the authority of men in the village to act outside the law. This action, and others like it, requires challenging the power of those who benefit from the status quo. Most organisations have neither the inclination nor the capacity to challenge institutional norms. This is why organisational change work is so critical to the enterprise of achieving gender equality through development interventions.

To promote organisational change that will enable the organisation to challenge gender inequality, change agents must understand and link organisational change, institutional change and gender equality. A good deal of effort has gone into changing organisations themselves, in order to enhance their ability to challenge and change gender-biased rules in a variety of institutional arenas. In this paper, we look at approaches to changing organisations and institutional rules, and discuss the elements of a new approach. But first, let's look briefly inside organisations themselves.

Gender-biased organisations

Organisations are sites – like families, markets and the state – where institutional rules are played out. As mentioned above, these rules specify how resources are allocated, and how tasks, responsibilities and values are assigned. In other words, institutional rules determine who gets what, who does what, and who decides. Although institutions vary within and across cultures, and are constantly evolving and changing, they are embedded in relational hierarchies of gender, class, caste, and other critical fault lines, which define identities and distribute power – both symbolically and materially.

These institutional rules operate in organisations. They are often below the surface, but are nevertheless interwoven into the hierarchies, work practices and beliefs of organisations. And they constrain the ability of these organisations to challenge gender-biased institutional norms within the organisation and in communities.

There is good theoretical as well as empirical work on the gender-biased nature of organisations and how these constrain their functioning.[1] In our work, we focus on understanding the 'deep structure' of organisations, and how to uncover it (Rao, Stuart and Kelleher, 1999). By 'deep structure' we mean the collection of values, history, culture and practices that form the unquestioned, 'reasonable' way of work in organisations.

The most important of these is exclusionary power, and how it is used to keep women's interests and perspectives out. Very few organisations have mechanisms or ways of balancing or restraining the power of those at the top. Very few enforce

accountability mechanisms. Although most organisations pride themselves on participation, this is almost always the type that keeps the authority structure of people, ideas and decision-making intact.

Power hides the fact that organisations are gendered at very deep levels. More specifically, women are prevented from challenging institutions by four interrelated factors:

Lack of political access: There are neither systems nor powerful actors who can bring women's perspectives and interests to the table;

Lack of appropriate accountability systems: Organisational resources are steered toward quantitative targets that are often only distantly related to institutional change for gender equality;

Cultural systems: The work–family divide perpetuated by most organisations prevents women from being full participants in those organisations as women continue to bear the responsibility for child and elderly care; and

Cognitive structures: Work itself is seen mostly within existing, gender-biased norms and understandings.

Gender and organisational change approaches

The table below highlights two prominent organisational approaches to working on gender equality: a gender infrastructure approach, and an organisational change approach, and delineates elements of a third approach, which we call 'gender and institutional change'.

Gender infrastructure approach

This involves putting into place a basic infrastructure, typically including an organisational gender policy, a gender unit of technically skilled change agents to work on organisational programmes, gender training and developing gender analysis tools, adopting family-friendly policies such as flexi-time and provision of workplace childcare, increasing the number of women staff and managers, and increasing resources devoted to programming targeted at women.

What we call the gender infrastructure approach here is very close to what has been implemented in many development organisations under the rubric of 'gender mainstreaming'. Gender mainstreaming is a phrase popularised by the United Nations agencies. It was originally conceived as a way to bring about institutional transformation. It is seen as a means to achieve gender equality, in the equitable access to society's resources, opportunities, education, and equal participation in the shaping of decisions, influencing what is valued, and so on. There are many ways to work toward it, including integrating gender analysis into programme planning, implementation and evaluation; including women's voices as well as men's in decision-making; addressing women's interests; securing women's access to benefits, and making both women's and men's contributions to development visible.

However, while gender mainstreaming was transformatory in its conception, experience has shown that it has had limited success in its implementation. The track record of gender mainstreaming within development agencies (public and private) has been poor primarily because it has been reluctantly adopted by 'mainstream' development agencies, whose top leadership has not adequately supported this agenda. It has too often been an 'add women and stir' approach, which does not question basic assumptions, strategic objectives, or ways of working. Gender mainstreaming has been implemented in an organisational context of hierarchy and agenda-setting that has not prioritised women's rights. It has focused overwhelmingly on promoting women's perceived 'basic needs', and not on meeting the strategic concerns of women themselves in terms of supporting them to give voice to their interests, or to mobilise and change

Table 1: Gender and organisational change approaches

Approach	Outcomes	Change strategy	Notes
Gender infrastructure	• Gender policy, including family-friendly policy • Gender Unit • Increased female staff and managers • Increased resources for programme work targeting women	• Reference to international covenants and agreements • Management support • Internal constituency • External pressure from women's movement and/or donors	• This 'formal' architecture is necessary but far from sufficient • This approach may leave organisational attitudes intact, making overworked gender staff fight uphill battles • Unlikely to develop new programme oriented to changing institutions
Organisational change	• Changes in the 'deep structure,' such as power relations, work–family balance, instrumentality, etc. • Accountability to client constituency	• A mixture of organisational development, pressure from internal and external constituencies, management support, gender training	• This is the 'informal architecture' required to change institutions • This approach risks creating a black hole of organisational change processes in which gender equality work may be lost
Institutional change for gender equality	• Organisational ways of working to facilitate change in social institutions beyond the organisation itself (families, communities, markets and the state).	• Gender analysis of the institutions relevant to the organisation's programme, developing programmes and processes to challenge these institutional norms, changing reward structures, building organisational capacity	• This approach grounds the change effort in the work and maintains the focus where it should be • Difficult to sustain without strong external pressure and high commitment from within the organisation.

unequal gender power relations. Finally, in some cases, gender mainstreaming has got lost in traditional organisational development concerns, with inadequate analysis of the issues, context and power dynamics – both internal and external – that are perpetuating women's disempowerment.

On the positive side, many change agents see putting the infrastructure in place to support gender work as a necessary first step. In a range of organisations, it has opened up a space for gender inequality to be discussed and addressed, ensured resourcing, and granted greater legitimacy to gender equity concerns. In a few instances, change agents have been able to parlay these resources into systemic change. But in most cases, it is clearly not enough to challenge institutional norms.

Organisational change approach

This approach involves changes that build the organisation's capacity to challenge gender-biased institutional rules, including: democratising relationships between employees in the workplace; making women's voices more powerful in the organisation; finding ways to make the organisation more accountable to women clients, and more amenable to the participation of women staff in decision-making; and finding ways of building relationships with other organisations to further a gender-equality agenda.

Much of the work on organisational change for gender equality has adapted practices of organisational development and organisational learning, particularly with regard to the importance of the learning process and of participation. Organisational development typically focuses on ensuring that information collection, analysis and action planning are participatory; and there is a focus on issues of communications and relationships, and increasing the equality of managers and staff. But, unlike traditional organisational development, the organisational change for gender equality approach holds that a new political alignment, which ensures that new gender issues are put on the agenda, is as important to the change process as rational analysis. The challenge is to develop methods to bring about organisational change that combine politics and participation with an understanding of the part organisations can play in bringing about equality. For many practitioners, this means linking organisational and feminist theory.

The work of the Gender Team at BRAC is a good example of this.[2] Eight years ago, the BRAC gender team was charged with leading a long-term effort to improve gender equality, both within BRAC itself as an organisation, and in BRAC's provision of services to poor rural women in Bangladesh. (In contrast, many organisation development (OD) interventions focus solely on organisational processes.) To achieve its aims, the gender team's initiative aimed to change organisational norms, systems, and relationships. BRAC's initiative used a basic organisational development approach to change, as outlined earlier.

After two years, the most important outcomes were: a loosening of rigid power imbalances within the organisation; better communication across levels of the hierarchy; greater space to raise and discuss 'taboo' issues; more attention to women's voices and their needs; changes in relationships between women and men and across programming silos (non-integrated programmes); and a resultant improvement in the quality of the work environment, and in programme-related problem solving (ibid.).

However, the intervention did not specifically focus on BRAC's relation with communities, or on the organisation's potential as an agent for institutional change; that is, it did not connect BRAC to village women members in a way that could have transformed gender power relations between the organisation and village women, and within the community at large.

Institutional change for gender equality

If our organisations are to help transform social institutions to bring about gender equality, a new approach is needed. Serious questions are being asked about the efficacy and outcome of 'traditional' approaches to mainstream gender into organisations. Putting infrastructure in place to advance women's interests is not proving adequate. Increasingly, we are aware that efforts in private human rights and development or public sector agencies to change gender-biased institutional rules have proceeded (by and large) without connection to initiatives to support women to mobilise and give voice to their shared concerns. In other words, the 'supply' side of the institutional change equation has been divorced from the 'demand' side of the equation.[3]

Gender and organisational change efforts are also proving inadequate; many have become mired in the intricacies and dynamics of internal organisational change, and in the process, the real purpose of these changes has vanished from sight. In addition, many such initiatives remain unconnected to the larger contextual forces that are changing women's opportunities and threats, morphing unequal gender relations into new forms without challenging the underlying inequality, and eroding gains. We have seen that the entry of larger numbers of women into decision-making structures has not transformed either the nature of those structures (in terms of decision-making power, transparency, accountability, or accessibility), nor the policies emanating from them. Voice and representation do not necessarily translate into influence.

We can draw two important implications for our work from this analysis.[4] First, only those who work consciously to change social rules, and to redistribute power and privilege as well as resources, can make significant and sustainable advances toward gender and social justice. Second, to enable organisations to contribute towards this process of social change, they need a new approach to gender issues, which re-focuses our attention onto the big issue – that is, the need to ensure that our work helps change social institutions to support equality between women and men.

The 'Institutional Change for Gender Equality' approach is being developed in response to this. It has potential to help organisations play a part in challenging gender-biased norms and values throughout society, as well as within themselves. It links the 'supply' side of the equation (internal organisational commitment and actions relating to gender inequality) to the 'demand' side (the broad range of efforts aimed at women's mobilisation, citizenship and voice). It brings these two critical dimensions back together into the same picture. Significant, sustainable advances toward gender and social justice can only be made by redistributing power and privilege, as well as resources. Adopting the approach would enable organisations to ensure their work contributes to upgrading women's position and voice, not only their material condition. Focusing on the wider picture of challenging unequal gender power relations in society will force attention (because of their importance to women's interests) on a variety of organisational forms including public systems, labour unions, and political parties, in addition to the set of more traditional governance, development and human rights actors.

Linking the 'supply' side of the institutional change equation more clearly to the 'demand' side requires that we go beyond asking how organisational values, power relations and practices need to change in order to actively take on, and respond to, the voice and perspectives of poor women. We need to ask a more profound question: that is, what are the key fulcrums and change processes that organisations can adopt, to enable them to interact with the wider environment in a way that results in positive outcomes which ensure justice for women? For example, accountability is a key fulcrum around which we can examine interactions between supply- and demand-oriented interventions, and analyse and change power systems.

Adopting this new approach requires organisations to ask some key questions:

- Are programme strategies consciously designed to change the way resources, power, and privilege are distributed between men and women in their societies?
- Are programme strategies changing gender-biased social rules and the institutions that enforce them, overtly or even covertly?
- Are organisations accountable to their constituencies for equity and gender

justice outcomes; do women have a means of recourse if they are not?

Addressing only one of these basic changes through a programme is insufficient. For example, the easiest kind of programme to instigate and fund is one that promotes changes in the access to and distribution of resources. Yet strategies that address the need for changes in power and social rules are more critical in promoting positive change in gender relations. In the absence of a clear focus on gender relations and the institutions that shape them, programmes can end up either reinforcing existing social arrangements, or creating new male élites. Work that does not address women's interests and gendered power relations will not achieve transformative social change. To turn to organisations themselves, only moderate gains in gender equality have been achieved because of the resistance of male managers, organisational culture, and lack of accountability including monitoring mechanisms and mechanisms to prevent gradual backsliding. We believe that organisations that intend to change power structures and biased gender and social relations have to put their money where their mouth is. They have to mirror these principles in their own structure and functioning in order to be effective.

Conclusion

To conclude with a critical question: how can we all develop better understandings of how to transform power hierarchies and institutional biases embedded in our organisations, and enable them to become more effective engines of social change? For Gender at Work – a new global knowledge and capacity building network on gender and institutional change – this is the driving question.

Gender at Work is currently working in India, South Africa and Latin America, in partnership with a variety of social change organisations to build new knowledge for practice (the strategic '*hows*'), specifically highlighting key aspects of strategic interventions that challenge and change power relations and promote better accountability to women's interests. This work involves analysing past efforts to effect organisational change to bring about gender equality. It also involves developing ideas about how to do this work more effectively, in a way that is relevant to developing country contexts, and social change organisations. We will examine the assumptions at the heart of 'feminist' organisations, particularly with regard to leadership and decision-making processes, and ask 'what happened?' We will look for stories of innovation, as well as challenges, ruptures, and contradictions at the nexus of gender equality, organisational effectiveness and institutional change. We plan to initiate action-learning processes, to change gender-biased institutional rules and change organisations. Through these processes, we hope to develop a collective voice, rooted in successful on-the-ground experience, to change international thinking and work for gender equality.

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Notes

1 See, for example, the work of Naila Kabeer, Anne Marie Goetz, and Joan Acker.

2 For a more complete description of principles, concepts, strategy, and tools, see Rao, Stuart and Kelleher, 1999.

3 This disconnection is obvious in other fields as well – citizen voice initiatives around the world, for example, are often considered quite separately from efforts to deal with public-sector efficiency problems. See, for example, Goetz, 2001.

4 This analysis draws on work done with Srilatha Batliwala in 2002 on women's leadership for social change.

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